

The next five chapters discuss findings from our qualitative research, which resulted from the focus group discussions. This work provides a richness and complexity to the quantitative analysis discussed in the prior chapters and is a unique contribution to previous research. This chapter provides a brief overview of qualitative research and our methodology to set the context for our findings and to ensure that the reader understands the limitations of the data and the inferences that can be drawn from them.

### **QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS**

The strengths of well-done qualitative research are several. These data focus on naturally occurring events in ordinary settings and are “locally grounded.” In other words, the data are collected in “close proximity to a specific situation, rather than through the mail or over the phone” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10). “Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people’s ‘lived experience,’ are fundamentally well suited for locating the *meanings* people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives: their ‘perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions’ (van Manen, 1977) and for connecting these meanings to the *social world* around them” (p. 10). Qualitative data are often advocated as the optimal strategy for developing hypotheses; they can be equally useful in testing hypotheses and in explaining and illuminating quantitative data.

One main method of conducting qualitative research is through focus groups. Focus groups are special types of groups in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. “A focus group is typi-

cally composed of 7–10 participants who are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group” (Krueger, 1994). The focus group is repeated several times with different groups of people. The objective is to create a permissive environment that allows different points of view and perceptions to be freely aired, all within the context of a carefully planned discussion. Focus groups have high face validity (results seem believable), and the results are easily understood. They are also a relatively low cost method of obtaining data.

However, the strengths of qualitative data are balanced by several weaknesses as well. The inherent nature of qualitative data—gathered through observations and interviews—and the fact that the researcher is the main measurement device mean that the data lend themselves more easily to distortion or misinterpretation. There is less control in group discussions because members interact with each other, so a dominant individual, unless carefully handled, can change the tenor or tone of the discussion. In addition, the fact that the discussion groups are small and generally purposefully chosen means that one cannot generalize from these data to the larger population of interest.

Nonetheless, in our study, we believe that qualitative data obtained through focus group discussions add a richness and complexity lacking in our quantitative data and allow us to test and refine the hypotheses we outlined above regarding barriers to minority participation in SOF.

## **HOW LOCATIONS WERE SELECTED FOR THE STUDY**

At the outset, we decided that we wanted to hold focus group discussions with both operator units and source populations for each service. However, the process of selecting units was constrained. We were limited to units that were not deployed, and given the current frequency of deployments for special operations forces and for some of our source populations, this was occasionally problematic. We were also limited to individuals who were not deployed, and in one instance, we conducted two visits to the same location to interview personnel who had been unavailable during our first trip.

In most cases, we received full support from the commanders of the units. This was especially true of SOF commanders. At other times, our study appeared to receive relatively low priority at the locale, and we were disappointed with the support we received. This occurred primarily at source population locations where unit schedules or training made it difficult for units to accommodate us.

The units selected represent two categories: SOF operator units and source population units. We included operator units from each service's SOF. The source population units were chosen after we determined the source population. Source population for the Air Force included basic trainees; for the Navy, basic trainees, midshipmen at the Naval Academy, and personnel from the fleet; and for the Army, combat arms personnel as well as combat support and combat services support personnel.

Units are not identified here for confidentiality reasons.

In an ideal research situation, we would have included more operator units from each service's SOF in different geographical locations to determine the effect of location, geographical mission focus, and different commanders. Likewise, an unconstrained research effort would also have incorporated more geographical diversity into the source population selection. Our research resources—both time and money—were unable to accommodate such a large-scale effort; nonetheless, our findings provide valuable insights.

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

The focus groups consisted of up to ten individuals and were divided by race and by rank. Focus group sessions were scheduled to last 90 minutes. Thus, at most locations, we conducted discussions among majority officers, minority officers, majority enlisted, and minority enlisted personnel. We also separated the senior enlisted from the junior enlisted personnel at source population locations, but we did not do so at the SOF locations; we were advised by SOF personnel that these distinctions are not stressed as much within the SOF community. When conducting groups with basic trainees and academy midshipmen, we also separated those personnel who had expressed an interest in joining the SOF community from those who had not expressed interest in SOF. In total, we held 54 focus groups

in which we interviewed 102 operators and 241 members of the source populations. Table 4.1 shows the composition of the focus group discussions.

**Table 4.1**  
**Sample Sizes for Focus Groups and Focus Group Participants**

Category of Participant	No. of Participants/Groups	
	Operators	Source Population
Minority	43/10	154/21
Majority	59/11	87/12
Officer	34/9	71/10
Enlisted	67/12	170/23
<b>Total</b>	<b>102/21</b>	<b>241/33</b>

#### **HOW INDIVIDUALS WERE SELECTED TO PARTICIPATE**

At each research location, we were given a contact person who scheduled the discussions, arranged for a facility, and in some cases, identified individuals to participate in our research discussion groups. At some of the source population locations, discussants represented several units. In these instances, our contact had requested that units provide participants by race and rank—e.g., minority officers, majority officers, minority enlisted of particular grades, etc.

At most operator locations, the participants represented only one or two units. In these instances, the local representative or someone within the units determined which majority personnel would participate, but we often needed to include every minority individual who was not deployed to fill the discussion groups. At each location, we gained a general understanding of how the individuals were selected. Although we acknowledge the possibility that units might have prevented our access to individuals whom they perceived to have objectionable views, we have no reason to believe that was the case.

On several occasions, the number of minority SOF operators present was so few that the group discussion turned into an interview. Although we asked the same questions, there was less opportunity

for the participants to debate or discuss issues among themselves in these instances.

### **FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

The focus groups were led by two researchers. In an introduction, we explained the reasons for the study and emphasized the confidentiality of the discussion. We reassured the participants that no one would be able to attribute comments to individuals or to specific units, that their comments would not be reported to the chain of command, and that any list of participants held by the unit would be destroyed. We told them that the session was voluntary and that they were welcome to leave or not to respond to any questions with which they were uncomfortable. We stressed the confidentiality of the session and asked for everyone in the room to acknowledge that they both agreed to participate and to keep the contents of the discussion confidential. We were prepared to excuse anyone who did not agree to these ground rules, but we did not need to excuse any participants.

Once we began the discussion, our questions concentrated upon the following issues: reasons for joining the service, career plans, impressions of SOF, knowledge of SOF, and perceptions and concerns about minority representation in SOF. The protocols we used for our sessions are attached in Appendix A, along with our introduction.

We turn now to our findings from these focus group discussions. These results are reported under the following broad headings that our analysis identified as perceived barriers to minority participation in SOF:

- Perceptions of SOF and a SOF career;
- Lack of individual and community knowledge of SOF;
- Lack of identification;
- Swimming requirement; and
- Lack of interest.